

may 1993

Water View

Courtney
Wagner +
Stephen
Dorff

Legendary Love

what happens when a
son of Nancy and Steve Dorff
meets the daughter
of Natalie Wood and

...there appears to be a receiver off the hook



MAY 1993

MAY: ALL YOUR DREAMS COME

movies in their blood

mario

maria

melvin

Melvin, Mario, and Maria Van Peebles.
San Francisco, 1958.

This month, Mario Van Peebles's *Posse* brings a contemporary urgency to a neglected genre—the black Western. He stars in it alongside his father, Melvin, whose impassioned 1971 film *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song* inspired a series of crude imitations known as “blaxploitation” movies; he is currently writing a script about the Black Panthers. Julie Dash, a pioneer of African-American film in her own right, rounded up both Van Peebleses for some straight talk about the contentious odyssey of the screen's black superhero

mario van peebles

JULIE DASH: For those readers who are way behind the times, Mario, you are the son of a man many people call the father of contemporary African-American film. You had an in-house mentor. What are your thoughts on that? [laughs] Briefly!

MARIO VAN PEEBLES: Yeah, there are not a lot of second-generation African-American film directors that I know of. I think what's interesting is that I grew up with an advantage and a disadvantage, the advantage being that I had a certain naïveté about how difficult things could be, because my father is black and he had no problems about being the boss. So I thought there could be a future for me in the business if I had film deals in the can. But it's only when you get out there and find that it's an old-boy network that you say, O.K., he had to be *superbad*! I figured I'd walk right in and say, *Hey, here I am, I'm ready.*

JD: So you understand your father a lot more now.

MVP: Oh, yeah! As a father, he's been very strong, and he's one of my best friends, and he's a cheap son of a bitch!

JD: He once told me, “Whenever you go out and do a job, you kick ass. You go do it better than anyone else.”

MVP: Which is what my granddaddy told me, too. So I went at it full force, without any inferiority complex. When you've grown up beside a strong tree, it's much harder for anyone to cripple you later in life.

JD: After *New Jack City* you could have taken the easy road and made lots of money. Instead, you've chosen to do a Western.

MVP: It was important to me not to do just *New Jack City Two, Three, and Four*, but instead say, Wait a minute now, we've done that; let's show them we can make money with some serious films. One of the prevailing doctrines right now is that a black period film won't make money. It's like our people have no sense of or appreciation of history, let alone that a lot of our history has been erased! A lot of folks don't know that almost one of three cowboys was black, that more than half the first settlers of Los Angeles were black, that a black man invented rodeo and the Western saddle, and that there were sisters on the range. When the African-American slaves were freed, a lot of them went up North but others went out West and founded their own towns, like Boley, Oklahoma. So there's some very rich history.

JD: Did you know that the historian Peter Wood said the original cowboys were African captives

who worked the range in South Carolina, and that the original term “cowboy” was a derogatory term applied to them? You know, like, *Hey, cow boy*. And now it's like everybody wants to be a cowboy—they're mythologized! So I can't wait to see these dusty brothers riding the range.

MVP: Well, the *advantage* we have is we're more used to looking at people of all races in the movies without thinking about it. For instance, *Posse* has more white people than Clint Eastwood's *Unforgiven* has black people, and yet *Posse* will be looked at as a “black” Western. I went to see *My Life as a Dog*, and I didn't even know the actors were Swedish or that the people in *The Last Emperor* were Chinese. But white folks, they see four black cowboys? “Wow, it's a black Western!” They trip on us more than we trip on them.

JD: After *Posse*, all the young street lions are going to be into their Western Thing. But it's good to role-play and see what's beyond your lot.

MVP: It's very healthy. When I show the trailer, which opens with hooves and cattle—

JD: The first thing white people say is, “Can black people ride horses?”

MVP: And the brothers were like, “Oh, it looks like *Young Guns*.” So it's a real trip. The father of Jessie Lee [Van Peebles's character and posse leader]—played by Robert Hooks—is based on and named after the Reverend King David Lee [co-screenwriter Sy Richardson's grandfather], who founded a black township in the West. In the film, King David gets killed. His doctrine is in line with that of Martin Luther King, sort of like, “We must make it by peaceful means.” After seeing his father murdered, Jessie becomes more parallel to Malcolm X in that his outlook is, “By any means necessary, I will get justice, I will take justice.”

But even though there's this balance, it's going to be seen as *dangerous*. It's like, “Boy, you're a filmmaker—sing a little, play ball, entertain us—but enough of all that ‘empowerment.’” So the way I play Jessie is, he does not crack jokes, he's not a funny cat. And that's very scary to some people because a lot of our stars have had to be comics to keep people laughing, to keep them rolling along—that's what they expect.

The other thing is I surrounded Jessie with stereotypical cats, like an illiterate brother and an intellectual brother. They [the white audience] are very comfortable with that: the big brother who can't read too well. But the minute you step into

the Western genre—which has been really white—and you go into that John Wayne territory, and you ride across the range, and you don't apologize, and you don't shuffle, and you don't crack no jokes . . . people go, “Wuh-oh!”

JD: Plus you're armed and talking Manifest Destiny.

MVP: It's like Eddie Murphy said in *48 Hours*: “I'm your worst nightmare: I'm a nigger with a badge.” But there's other things I do as a filmmaker that don't make it easy for *any* race to view the film. For example, there is a beating in *Posse* that is very similar to the Rodney King beating, only the perpetrators are white and the *victim* is white. I have a white boy in the posse, played by Stephen Baldwin, and the black folks love him. So the black audience comes to the movie really to see the brothers, but they also fall in love with this white boy! And then at the end of the movie, he turns out to be the one getting beat on, which starts the whole war—he becomes the Helen of Troy.

JD: How is it to both direct and star?

MVP: In *Posse* it was a lot of fun, and it made the process a lot easier. I was right there in the saddle, and I'm also the leader of the posse. It makes it easy for me to just go, *Ho!* and the horses and the posse stop all around me.

I talked to Clint Eastwood about *Unforgiven*, and he said it's more interesting to pull back a little bit and let the audience reach in. So I made Jessie enigmatic and dark. He doesn't have a lot of lines. I shot him in the shadows, with a lot of silhouettes. He's a sort of ghost, a silent observer.

Since I was already saying that black folks don't have a sense of history, I thought, Well, not only do I want to do a film with all this history, but I also want to do a *cinematic* history. So I took the posse of the '90s—Blair Underwood, Tone Loc, Big Daddy Kane, Charles Lane, Tiny Lister Jr., and myself—and we go meet the posse of the '70s, the old generation, with *Shaft* represented by Isaac Hayes, *Sweetback* [*Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song*] represented by Melvin, *Foxy* [*Foxy Brown*] by Pam Grier. And of course the granddaddy of it all, telling the story, is Woody Strode, who starred in *Sergeant Rutledge*, *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance*, and *Once upon a Time in the West*. So what's fun is that you've got the young folks watching the first posse, and the older folks going, That's Isaac Hayes! That's Pam Grier! I love bringing the circle back. Because Melvin is not my *only* dad. Those were *all* our parents, cinematically. ■

melvin van peebles

I first ran into Melvin Van Peebles in 1972, when I was attending City College, in New York, as an undergraduate in the film department. Although I missed a presentation he gave, I was still able to brag to my friends that I saw "Van Peebles," as we called him, rushing down Eighth Avenue to catch the A train. He was wearing a ponytail; everybody else was wearing an Afro. In the early '70s black filmmakers in New York City were either documentarians working for public television or were affiliated with the Young Filmmakers Foundation and the Studio Museum of Harlem. Melvin was our living legend: he was one of few black directors whose movies were getting released. Contrary to recent hype, boyz and girlz in the 'hood were making independent films back then. But as far as mainstream cinema was concerned, black filmmakers were so low on the totem pole that a journalist once referred to us as "outlaws." I left New York City in 1974 to study with the West Coast outlaws at UCLA's graduate film school. Around this time, I met Mario Van Peebles, Melvin's son, at his grandfather's house in Pasadena. He was a doe-eyed, bashful teenager working on his sit-ups and his bid whist game. He never said much to me. He was the quiet kind, had a lot on his mind. He just smiled.

JULIE DASH: What was it like, being directed by your son in *Posse*?

MELVIN VAN PEEBLES: When Mario is directing, he is the director. What he says is what I do. When I am directing, I am the director. What I say is what they do. There is an advantage, however, in having similar backgrounds, because I know what he is going to want before he asks. In short, it's the easiest work I do, and it's a lot of fun.

JD: What's the importance of *Posse* as a black Western?

MVP: The original reason I decided to be involved with the film was that I felt we weren't seeing a reflection of ourselves in history. Some of the images we see are good, and some are bad. But without understanding your history, you're doomed to make its mistakes.

JD: Why do you think black Westerns such as *Posse*, Eddie Murphy's upcoming version of *The Magnificent Seven*, and Joel Silver's *Buffalo Soldiers* are emerging now, following the onslaught of "homey" movies?

MVP: I'm not an anthropologist or a sociologist—I'm pretty much of a hermit. But I think it is a natural progression that black filmmakers would move from their introspective, autobiographical first movies to larger palettes, films of wider scope. And since nostalgia is again on the uprise, there's this whole period left to explore.

JD: Let's talk about the "blaxploitation" films of

the '70s. Did you consider your film *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song* a part of the blaxploitation era?

MVP: Yes and no. Blaxploitation would not have taken place without the huge financial success of *Sweetback*. The formula of *Sweetback* was pre-empted—taken and perverted and watered down and used in a counterrevolutionary way. For example, in *Shaft* [1971] and in *Cleopatra Jones* [1973], the formula became, We can't just have black people running the show, so what we'll do is feature a maverick black who really works for the white Establishment. In other words, John Shaft [played by Richard Roundtree] could argue with the police captain, but the police captain was the one who really held the reins.

But soon after, movie companies realized that audiences *liked* to see blacks triumph, so what they would do is take a white character at the beginning of the film and make him a villain everybody could hate: have him stick pins in some

Spike Lee and the Hudlin brothers were right when they called me the Godfather of Modern Black Cinema. The path I have pointed to has been more accurately followed by this new wave of young black directors.

JD: I understand you're working on a screenplay about the Black Panthers, one of several in the works.

MVP: For fifteen years I've been working on a novel about the Black Panther Party. Mario suggested I make it into a screenplay. He said, "Dad, you were there. I mean, you're the man. You were close enough to it and far enough away from it, in another way, to have the right overview." That was long before this current trend.

JD: Who do you have in mind for directing it?

MVP: Myself or Mario. I did it for Robert De Niro's company, Tribeca. The experience was wonderful. I said to them, Look, I'm not making any political adjustments whatsoever, even though the script

is pretty hot. And it's not past-tense "hot," it's "the hot continues." If they don't [put it out], I'll do it myself or with my son.

JD: Why do you think there's been a reawakening of interest in the Black Panther movement?

MVP: I think it is a supremely interesting story in itself. It's that, plus the sense that time has passed, which gives it a veneer of nostalgia, a false nostalgia, like, Gee, how tough things were and how things have changed. Whenever you go back, people feel more comfortable with the horrors of the past compared with the comforts of the present. It's that looking back, coinciding with that we're in the second phase of a black film wave. Altogether, it makes for a boffo story.

JD: When you write screenplays, do you

ever veil your information and write it one way but actually mean something else, and hope that the director "gets it"?

MVP: Take *Watermelon Man* [the 1970 serio-comedy, directed by Van Peebles, about white bigot Godfrey Cambridge, who turns black overnight]. The producers said, "Look, Melvin. Let's shoot two different endings." In one, the alarm clock was supposed to ring, and Cambridge wakes up and it's all just a bad dream. [In the original, he stays black and becomes a militant.] They said, "Well, go ahead and do both, and we'll see." Now, I'm not *that* dumb. Once it's in the can, I know what "we'll see" means. So I juggled the schedule around so much that nobody could tell what I was shooting, and two months later I was in Europe, and I got this call from the producers, who said, "Look, Melvin, we can't find the other version."

JD: The shot where he wakes up.

MVP: Yeah. I said, "Oh, shit! I forgot to shoot that." Hey, you gotta do what you gotta do. ■



Godfrey Cambridge (right) fades to black in Melvin Van Peebles's *Watermelon Man* (1970), also starring Estelle Parsons.

poor little girl's eyes or pull the wings off a sparrow. That way, we're *allowed* to kill him or get even with him later on in some showdown scene. It's like throwing us a bone. Then the next step was to have the so-called black authorities maintain the status quo and work—grudgingly, and maybe even with a little bit of style—for the white Establishment.

But *Sweetback* put the Establishment in a dilemma. You see, here's this film that is extremely distasteful, but it's making loads of money. Did you know that in the beginning the Motion Picture Association gave it an X rating [later changed to R]? I made these T-shirts that read RATED X BY AN ALL-WHITE JURY, and everybody got pissed off.

JD: So do you see yourself as the father of blaxploitation?

MVP: You have to decide that for yourself. I think